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AUTHOR Schnell, Jim
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ABSTRACT

At the root of effective listening is appreciating the difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is merely a physiological process, whereas, listening is an interpretive process. Listener misunderstandings can be curbed by keeping a few ideas in mind. First, accurate meaning is not necessarily transmitted in each oral communication encounter; words are merely sounds we infer from. Second, listening is a form of intrapersonal communication. The reflection process whereby a person determines what has been just said to him or her draws heavily from past experiences. Third, listener expectations affect what is heard and comprehended. Fourth, there are listening distractions that inhibit effective listening. Factual listening distractions occur when the listener listens for facts instead of main ideas. Mental listening distractions occur when the listener has too much intrapersonal communication while engaged in interpersonal communication. Fifth, the most useful and relatively easy form of listening is active listening. Active listening requires restatement to ensure understanding. It also means that the listener pays attention to not only what is said but how it is said. During a counseling session, these methods helped a professor uncover the real reason that a student was considering quitting school. (TB)

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EFFECTIVE LISTENING: MORE THAN JUST HEARING

Jim Schnell, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Ohio Dominican College

As a professor of interpersonal communication, most of my research deals with cross-cultural communication and how the communication process can be improved overall. The field has grown considerably since I completed my Ph.D. in 1982 but the focus on effective listening has been consistently strong and relevant.

At the root of effective listening is appreciating the difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is merely a physiological process whereby you are aware of noise in the environment that does not require interpretation on your part (i.e. hearing traffic-related noise as you walk down a busy street). Listening is far more complex. Listening is an interpretive process whereby you make sense out of the sounds you are hearing (i.e. being able to distinguish your name being called out amongst the aforementioned traffic-related noise, and perhaps recognizing the voice of the speaker). Any act of listening is interpretive and, since we human beings are formed by different experiences, our interpretive processes will also vary. Thus, two people can listen to the same message and understand it differently.

For instance, in my five visits to China (where I lecture at a university in Beijing) I always notice the Chinese listening process gives far more consideration to

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nonverbal dynamics than how we in the U.S. tend to focus more on literal statements. In the U.S. if I say I don't want any tea most listeners will understand I don't want any tea. In China, given most circumstances, the listener will interpret my statement to mean I do want tea but not alot.

The same confusion occurs within our own culture. Closer to home, I find that many of my American college students incorrectly interpret my statement "I don't accept late assignments" to mean "I don't <u>like</u> accepting late assignments". I know this is usually because their past experience has exposed them to faculty who say "no late assignments" but who will accept late assignments. Thus, I reinforce the message by stating it frequently and underlining it in the course syllabus.

So, listener misunderstanding can be curbed by keeping a few ideas in mind regarding the interpretive aspects of listening. First, accurate meaning is not necessarily transmitted in each oral communication encounter. Words are merely sounds we infer meaning from. Second, listening is a form of intrapersonal communication (<u>inter</u>personal communication is between/among people but <u>intra</u>personal communication is within ourselves). Intrapersonal communication is a mild form of daydreaming whereby we reflect on the meaning of what is said to us. This reflection process draws heavily from our own past experiences, which can obviously be different than past experiences of others. I am not very sympathetic towards

students who are ill because, in 15 years of teaching, I have never missed a day of class because of illness. However, I am sympathetic if a student has kidney stones, because I had kidney stones once. Third, listener expectations affect what is heard and comprehended. We sometimes look for the meaning we expect or want. Thus the boy who asks his dad if he can go to a baseball game, and receives a response of "Go ask your mother", may convey his request to his mother as "Dad said I can go to the baseball game if it is okay with you."

There are listening distractions that inhibit effective listening. Factual listening distractions occur when we listen for facts instead of main ideas. This happens in the classroom when students memorize facts related to an event but don't consider the overall significance of the event (i.e. the history student who memorizes dates & battles of the Vietnam War but fails to understand how the Vietnam War has affected present day U.S. foreign policy). Semantic listening distractions occur when words and phrases are used differently or have different meanings. These are most common in interaction between the youth culture and adult culture (i.e. my ten year old nephew telling me to "chill out", which I eventually learned means "relax") and between people from different regions of the U.S. (i.e. my colleague in the Carolinas enigmatically telling I'd be better off driving on the "interstate" when I asked him how to get the "freeway").

Mental listening distractions occur when we have too

much intrapersonal communication while engaged in interpersonal communication. The intrapersonal communication that was previously mentioned is normal but too much inner-reflection, or daydreaming, can greatly inhibit listener understanding. Physical listening distractions are physiological rather than psychological. These are, quite simply, noise in the environment that limit the ability of the listener to receive the intended message. This type of problem can be most easily dealt with in comparison to the other types of listening distractions. For instance, in my childhood my mother did not allow us to have a T.V. on during dinner because this "noise" inhibited family sharing.

A useful, and relatively easy, means to more effective listening is "active listening". Active listening involves listening to understand and provide feedback. Active listening requires restatement to ensure understanding. This assures (you and the speaker) that you received the message correctly. For example, when I am given directions how to drive to an unfamiliar location I repeat the instructions to ensure I got the directions correctly. This increases the confidence of the speaker and I that I will reach the described destination.

Another important part of active listening is to listen for content (what is said) and feelings (how it is said) and respond to both. This ties in nicely with restatement to ensure understanding. For instance, during a counseling session with a student, she described why she was going to

drop out of college eventhough she was doing well and had the financial means to continue. As I stated my understanding of her reason for leaving college, which was merely paraphrasing what she'd told me, it was apparent her rationale was not logically sound. She was leaving college, eventhough she was doing well and wasn't having financial problems, and she didn't have an employment opportunity she wanted to pursue. I also shared with her my observation that her delivery led me to believe she didn't fully agree with her own position (she seemed hesitant and uncertain) and that I was left wondering "why is she <u>really</u> leaving college?". I asked her to think it over and come see me the following week.

In our follow-up meeting she shared that she'd come to realize she was quitting college because her boyfriend had flunked out of college and he was encouraging her to leave school as well. This caused her to re-evaluate her decision to leave school (she graduated the following year) and to re-evaluate her relationship with him. Obviously, active listening was a helpful technique in my working with her.

Active listening is appropriate for any situation that requires, or will benefit from, the listener having a clear understanding of the speaker's message. In less formal situations, where casual conversations about topics of little consequence are occurring, active listening would not beneficial. In fact, it can be distracting. For example, a casual lunch conversation with my colleague doesn't

necessitate my having a thorough understanding of what her favorite vegetable is and why. However, active listening with the same colleague is appropriate if we are discussing our views on significant changes in the curriculum.

Effective listening skills can benefit your professional life at the office and personal life at home. The key ingredient in both settings is understanding. Effective listening: more than just hearing.